

# HEALTH & WELLNESS

ISSUES CONCERNING THE WELL-BEING OF THE AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY

## Fitness standards track aging process

By LAURAN NEERGAARD  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON — Just because you're 75, you shouldn't have trouble lifting a bag of groceries or getting up from a chair.

But for millions of older Americans, those simple activities are a daily struggle. Disabling frailty doesn't have to be part of aging. In fact, studies have found that even 90-year-olds can rebuild lost muscle with some careful exercise.

It would be better to never become so frail in the first place, and researchers have come up with a way to help: fitness performance standards to let anyone 60 and older assess quickly if they're in good physical condition for their age, or if they're at risk of a downhill slide that could lead to a nursing home.

"Our main interest is in keeping people mobile and staying physically independent as long as possible," said Roberta Rikli, a professor at California State University, Fullerton. She led a study of 7,000 Americans ages 60 to 94 that established the standards. If the tests signal you're at risk of becoming too frail, "we can do something to try to prevent that," she said.

The exercise tests are simple enough that many people could try them at home, and senior centers around the country are starting to use them.

Frailty is a huge risk of aging. By age 70, most people have at least 20 percent less muscle than they did at age 30. About 70 percent of elderly women are too frail to lift just 10 pounds, and 60 percent cannot perform such household work as vacuuming. About 35 percent of men are equally frail. Some of the muscle deterioration may be inevitable. But Rikli says at

least half is due to people becoming more sedentary with age, meaning that keeping active is important if you want healthy retirement years. Rikli and colleague C. Jessie Jones studied some 7,000 Americans over 60 who live independently. They performed such simple tests as:

- How many times in 30 seconds they could rise from a straight-backed chair without using their arms to push themselves up. That measures lower body strength.

- How many times in 30 seconds they could lift a weight — 5 pounds for women, 8 pounds for men — in a "bicep curl" that measures upper body strength.

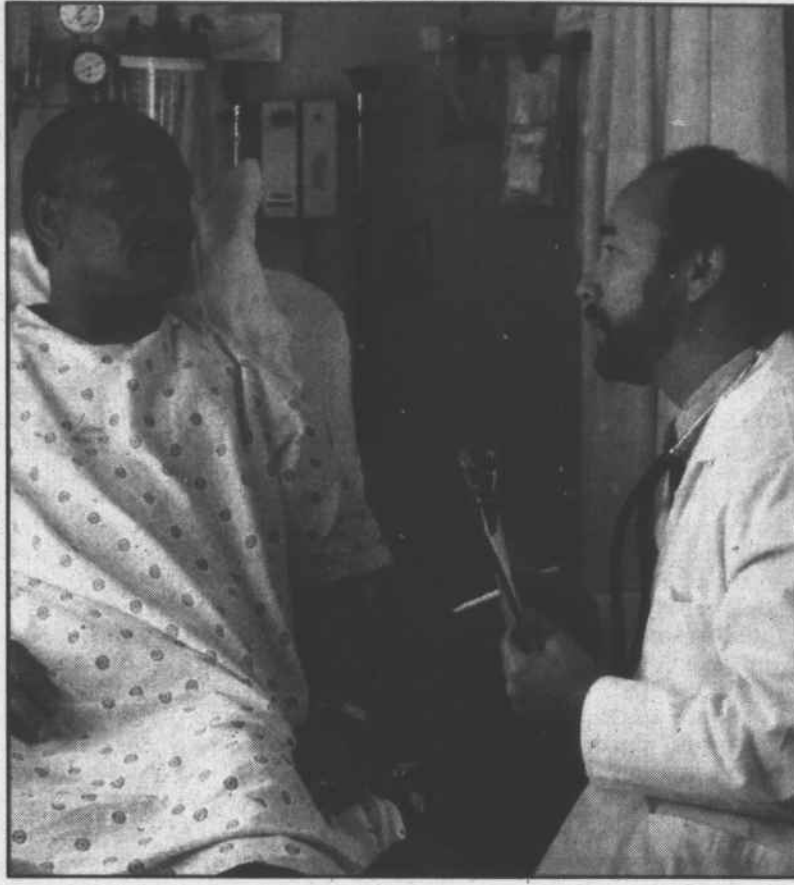
- How many yards they could walk in six minutes, to measure aerobic fitness.

- How long it took them to rise from a chair, walk eight feet and return to a seated position, to measure mobility.

The study, funded by a Medicare HMO provider, set standards for fitness levels that are normal, below average, or so low that people are at risk of needing a nursing home. Say an 80-year-old woman could stand up from a chair without pushing off 10 times in 30 seconds. That's normal for that age. But doing only 10 of these "chair stands" at age 60 is below average — and while people at that level may function OK right now, they're at big risk of losing mobility by age 75.

Rikli found that fitness declined with age on average 1 percent a year. She advised people to track whether they're declining faster than normal, or if exercise is paying off and they're improving.

Regardless of age, people who got moderate physical activity at least three times a week were the most fit. Some doctors already use



File photo  
Disabling frailty doesn't have to be a part of aging. Studies have shown that exercise rebuilds lost muscle.

similar, but experimental tests to assess elderly patients' limitations.

"They're very powerful predictors" of who will wind up disabled, said Dr. Jack Guralnik of the National Institute on Aging, a pioneer of the studies. Rikli wants such assessments to reach more older Americans.

She hopes to have easy-to-read consumer brochures available by fall to illustrate the tests and show how to measure anyone's fitness level against the national standards. "That's an excellent idea," said Guralnik. "The more people

are aware of their level of functioning, the more they can tune into the fact that they need to exercise."

Already, some of the 267 senior centers that participated in Rikli's study are using the fitness assessments. She will advertise the consumer brochures in publications targeted to older Americans once they're complete. But instead of waiting, senior centers or doctors could simply check April's edition of the Journal of Aging and Physical Activity for the study results.

## Malnutrition a growing risk to homebound elderly

By KATHERINE ROTH  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

NEW YORK — Ginevra Mattioli's husband and closest friend are dead, her children live elsewhere and, at 89, she can't get to the store on her own, much less prepare daily meals for herself. The hot chicken and rice lunch on her table was brought to her by volunteers.

"A body gets old. ... I used to make lots of spaghetti. But now I can't stand," says the Italian immigrant.

She touches a cut on her head from a recent fall, then mentions that she has lost five pounds in recent weeks. Like many home-bound elderly, Mrs. Mattioli must rely on outsiders' help to provide her food. But one group that offers such meals — the non-profit Citymeals on Wheels USA — cautions that that for a growing number who depend on the program, one delivered meal is simply not enough.

"Malnutrition among the elderly is a serious national epidemic," said Marcia Stein, president of the New York-based group.

The problem has grown in part because people live longer; it's being made worse by Americans' mobility, which often leaves old people alone.

The concern is widespread.

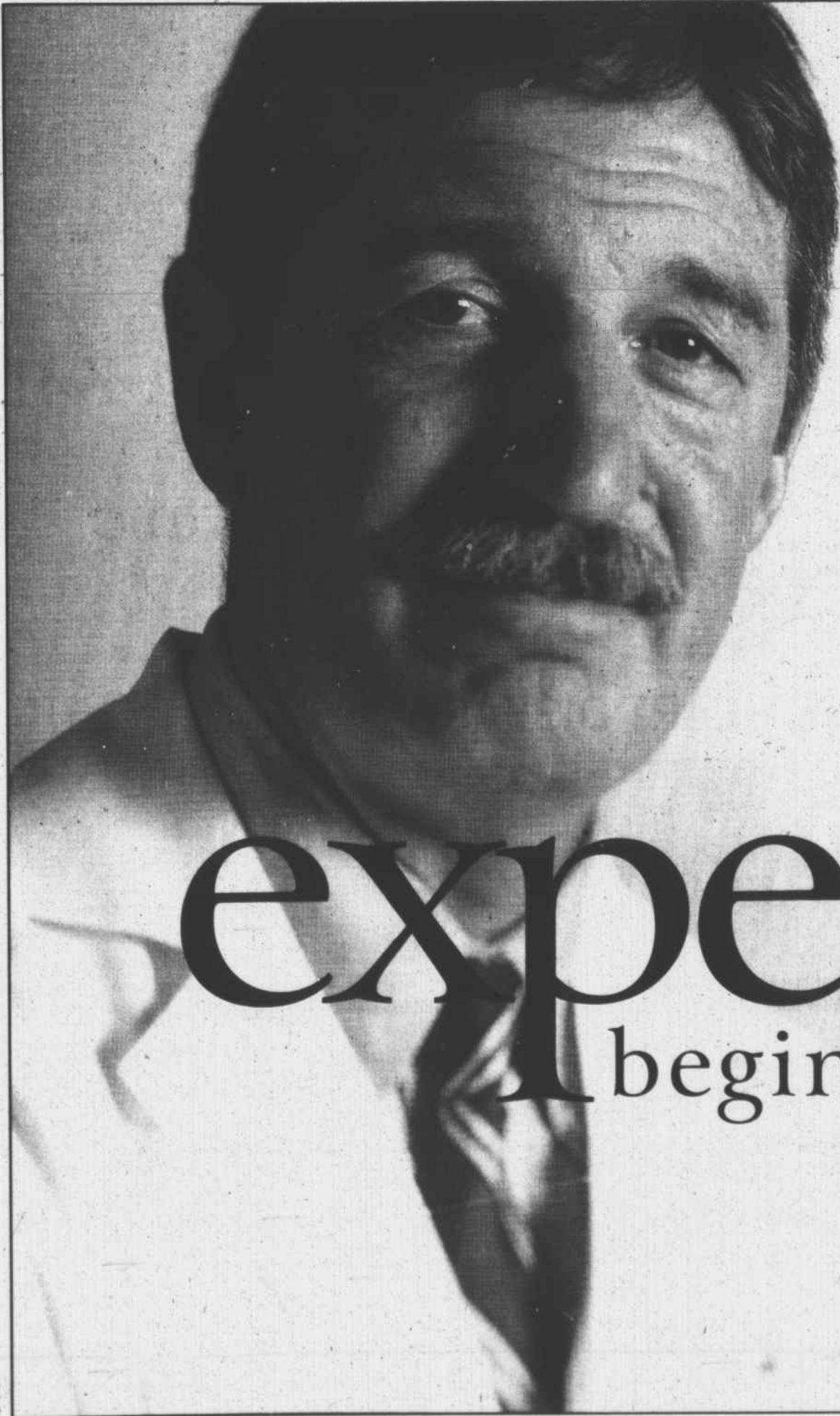
In North Carolina, for example, the Wake County Meals-on-Wheels estimates that 52 percent of its recipients are at risk for malnutrition. Most of those are 80 and above, said Vivien Keys, director of the county program. In Rhode Island, 900 people receive the \$4 to \$5 meals daily while others are forced to wait more than a year to start getting them.

"It's a major crisis. ... We have 300-plus people waiting every week who are quite ill or terminally ill. And the problem is getting worse," said Denise Martin, director of development at Rhode Island Meals-on-Wheels.

Nationwide, most of the 1 million meals delivered to homes daily are funded by government. In New York, the private sector provides about 37 percent, and Citymeals is trying to raise private donations in 20 cities to provide a second hot meal. Currently, only the most at-risk people in a handful of cities — including New York, Miami and Buffalo — get a second meal. By contrast, 41 percent of American cities have waiting lists of elderly seeking home-delivered meals.

For many, isolation is compounded by poverty. Almost 40 percent of recipients of home-delivered meals are living below the poverty level, on \$7,800 a year or less, Citymeals estimates. In New York, 60 percent of meal recipients live in poverty. One of

See Malnutrition on C4



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